



## **The Role of Religion in 21st-Century Public Schools: Historic Perspectives on God and Goodness in the Classroom**

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### **The Enduring Problem of Religion and the Public Schools**

No other educational issue hits a more sensitive nerve with the American public than the role of religion in the public schools. This is the issue that causes parents to storm school board meetings and science teachers to duck and cover. It's the issue that keeps newspaper editors busy all day and school administrators awake all night—the one stoking the public fire, the other trying to figure out what to say to a group of parents who demand that the upcoming graduation ceremonies be opened in prayer.

We shouldn't be surprised that such issues evoke strong responses from people involved directly and indirectly with the public schools. The public schools have always been a public arena where people with vastly different political, moral, and religious ideas and understandings send their children for assistance with a task that could not be more precious or dear to them—the education of their children. Parents and other community members contend with one another and with those responsible for educating their children so insistently about the presence of religious ideas and activities in the public schools because something vital is at stake—the moral (and, perhaps, spiritual) development of their children, at least part of which happens in the public schools.

Parents think and wonder almost continuously during the years they are raising their children about the kind of persons their children will become and the kind of life each will lead. “Will my child be happy in the living of his or her life?” is always a first question they ask themselves, and so, too, “Will my child be healthy?” These are not usually questions that generate much controversy. We have a generally clear idea of what we mean by “health,” and we only disagree about what it means to be “happy” if we start to think about it too much. As long as we mean by “happy” the feeling that exists when one is relatively free from pain or anxiety or when a reasonable state of well-being is maintained—and as long as we agree that each of us has an unencumbered right to pursue what it is we believe will make us happy—then there is not much about which to argue.

It's when we ask the third important question natural to all parents in thinking about their children that the trouble starts. The third question is “Will my child be a good person?” Like the other two, this third question has a correlate question: “How do I help my child become a good person?” It may be, in a certain sense, that this question is like the one about happiness—as long as we don't think about what we mean by a “good person” very hard we can all agree. If by being “good” we have in mind only a sort of low-level civic responsibility—basic law abidingness

or a minimal tolerance of those we don't especially care about—then we're probably on safe ground.

But most parents have a more particular idea of the kind of “goodness” they want for their children. For most religious people, in most religious communities in the United States, the goodness they want for their children is bound up in a life of religious faith. For them, being “good” involves (at least to some extent) living a life that is in accord with the law or with the teachings of a god that has revealed to members of the religious community what it is they are to believe and how they are supposed to live their lives. The sacred texts of received religions set out an ideal, or an “ought,” for how one should live.

These religious parents often (usually) send their children off to the public schools. They look at children's literature books and science textbooks. They look at curricular materials used in elementary reading programs and high school “Marriage and Family” classes. They look at moral routines chosen by the school, like the saying of the Pledge of Allegiance at the start of the elementary school day and the presence (or absence) of a prayer at high school graduation ceremonies. They look at high school club activities, like Bi-Gala and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. They want to know what their tax dollars actually buy in the school setting, and they tend to support those things they believe contribute to the vision they want for their children, and they tend not to support those they see as detrimental. They want teachers and school administrators to support and contribute to the vision they have for their children, or at least not work counter to it.

Parents not oriented by religious understandings do the same kinds of things as religious parents as they try to make their children into good people; and nonreligious parents, too, send their children off to public schools, and there they watch over the content and practices of their children's education. They are interested in the stories their children read in elementary school, and they want to know about what the biology textbook says about evolution or creationism. They care about how sexual relations are discussed in health and “Marriage and Family” classes, and they monitor the kinds of clubs or fellowship offered to their children. And they are as interested as the religiously oriented parent in whether or not their tax dollars and the practices of the school support or fail to support the vision they have for their children.

But while the intentions and actions of the religious and non-religious parents and community members overlap a great deal as they conceive of the good people they want their children to become, there is no apparent overcoming of their differences regarding the place of religious faith and religious life in that vision. Non-religious parents do not use religious language to describe the basis of their moral commitments and their hopes for the moral life their children will lead. Other second languages are available to them, each suggesting a community to serve, and each with the power to circumscribe our first instincts for radical autonomy. There is, for instance, the language of the civic republican tradition that articulates commitments and practices that can powerfully shape character. These commitments and practices establish interconnections between people, joining people to families, friends, communities, and churches—making each individual aware of his reliance on the larger society (Bellah, 1985, p. 251). The second languages of social responsibility and social justice suggest other commitments, duties, and obligations that can shape “the habits of the heart” of young people. Religious people have recourse



to these same second languages, and most of us speak a mix of second languages as we try to articulate the commitments that bind us to one another and suggest duties and obligations central to the living of a good life.

So, the group of parents and community members that wants faith-based understandings for their children press the school administrator to open graduation ceremonies with what they deem to be an appropriate prayer. The group of parents and community members that insists the school not endorse or inculcate faith-based understandings—the secular humanists and those with religious understandings who worry school people may be forced to endorse only limited and particular understandings—press those same administrators to deny the request for the opening prayer. And so the newspaper editor churns out his paper. And so the school administrator tosses in her sleep, unable to please everyone.

### **Does Man Need God in Order to be Good?**

The question of God—about whether or not one should be raised to believe in God or some form of higher power—is a central educational question. We cannot will it away. That is because we cannot escape thinking about the kinds of questions with which this essay opens—about the happiness and health and goodness we want for our children. The moment we start thinking about the kind of good life we want our children to lead—the kind of good people we want them to become—is the moment we start down the road that leads to the god question. Why should man be good? Why should he be compassionate? Why should he care as much or more about others as he does himself? We ask these things in the frame of thinking about our children. We also ask them when we think about ourselves. Why should I be kind to others, even when I feel myself being abused? Why should I care about my children when the care goes unrewarded? Why should I come home every night to my wife instead of going somewhere else? Do I do these things because I have faith in a god who teaches me to do them and gives me reason for doing so, or do I do these things because I have some other conception of or reason for goodness?

Every important educational philosopher, from Plato on, has dealt with this question. And, in America, every important thinker worried about the function and purpose of the public school has dealt with them, from the founding fathers on. And, as it turns out, these thinkers couldn't disagree more about the place of religious faith in the education of the young.

It will perhaps be useful, as we think about how and why this “God question” is so central to the education of our children, if we remind ourselves of the contours of the arguments put forth by some central educational thinkers. How is it possible that our best educational thinkers could disagree so radically on such an important issue? A brief look at the ideas of Plato, Rousseau, and the founders of the common schools in America, as well as more contemporary educational philosophers John Dewey and Nel Noddings, may help expand our ways of viewing this question.

### **Plato's Perfect City**

In Plato's *Republic*, the rich and powerful young men of Athens—the young men who aspire one day to come to power and rule the city—gather around Socrates, first of all, to talk about the nature of justice and political power. To these ambitious and potentially dangerous young men, Socrates offers to describe the “perfect city” and the “perfect men” who will inhabit

it. In the perfect city that will satisfy the longings of these young men, Socrates describes the perfect guardians and how they must be educated. The perfect guardians are, of course, the ones perfectly suited by nature to be fierce defenders of the city. They are characterized by *thymos*, or a warlike spiritedness that makes them fearless and invincible in the defense of the city (375b)—the same kind of fearlessness we see in a guard dog that will die in defense of his (or her) owner or the property it takes to be its own. In humans this *thymos* can appear as anger, or rage, or zeal. We recognize *thymos* in the spiritedness of the war hero, fearless in attacking the enemy even when he knows he may die in the attempt.

But just as the dog, willing to attack (and kill) the “enemies” come to do harm to its owner, is a gentle and affectionate dog with the people it knows and loves, so, too, must the perfect guardian—the ferocious defender of the city—be gentle and affectionate toward his fellow citizens. This becomes the first educational task in Socrates’ perfect city: to make the guardians into *kaloagathos*, or gentlemen, who are gentle when among their countrymen, but fierce and full of *thymos* when defending the city from its enemies. While not an easy education to effect, it is, perhaps the most critical, as we see in our own time. We know the dramatic, even tragic, consequences of failing to conduct this education properly whenever we learn of some general in a third world country—tired of his own political impotence or urged on by the soldiers beneath his command—who conducts a military coup and comes to power. Absent the right education, the noble dog can and will turn on its owner.

To guarantee the fidelity of the guardians to the people, Socrates insists their first education be about the gods of the city—and the stories about the gods must be carefully chosen. The young guardians are not to hear all the awful stories about what the gods did to one another and to the humans who worshipped them—only the stories that depict the gods of the city in the most admirable and perfect ways. These stories, Socrates says, will make the young men into warriors who honor the gods and ancestors, and they will become men who are serious about their friendship with one another. The guardians will have proper opinions about the gods and will become pious and just (Bloom, 1968, p. 353).

But while this teaching about the gods is sufficient for the guardians of the city, it is not sufficient for those young men who might one day lead the city—the philosopher-kings. For the philosopher-kings, the gods are useful and necessary to the peaceful and orderly operation of the city, and they deserve respect and receive public homage. But the goal for the philosopher-king is not to come to have “proper opinions,” or “true opinions,” about the pious and the just, as it is for the guardians. The education of the philosopher-king is to lead him to knowledge (*episteme*), specifically, to knowledge about the truth of things. The way to the truth of things, for Socrates, was not divine revelation—it was through reasoning (*logos*). The education of the philosopher-kings was always aimed at perfecting this reasoning ability. The philosopher-king, liberated from the cave of opinion, was one day to come to know the *idea of the good*—that perfect, ultimate knowledge of the whole, of the one and the many.

The young men gathered to talk to Socrates (especially Glaucon, the particular favorite in the dialogue) are not interested in becoming guardians—they want to be philosopher-kings, and they picture themselves as such even as they may fail to possess the capacities outlined by Socrates as he discusses the nature of the philosopher-king. Throughout the course of the dialogue,



Socrates shows these young men something much better for them than what they thought they wanted at the beginning of the dialogue, which was political power—specifically, the power of the tyrant who is able to command whatever it is he believes he wants. Superior to political power, Socrates convinces them, is knowledge, or wisdom—the life of the philosopher—and by the end of the dialogue they turn away from their tyrannical ambitions in favor of the pursuit of wisdom. Here, religious faith or adherence to the teachings of the gods does not make the young men good—the perfection of their reason does. Even the erotic Glaucon now has reason to subdue his passions and be “stronger than himself” (431a) because now he knows something better and more worthy of his strongest desires. The guardians and the artisans (the *hoi polloi*) need faith in and fear of the gods in order to subdue their passions and become good, but the elite few need only the power of their reason. With the arguments of Socrates and Plato and a commitment to untrammelled reason, the Western tradition begins. Faith in reason and the rational discovery of the truth of things led to philosophy and natural science as we know them.

### Rousseau’s Natural Man

An inheritor and great critic of that tradition, especially a critic of the Enlightenment and its understanding of man based on tenets of natural science, stands Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the great Romantic who protested that those who understood man simply as some great reasoning animal were simply setting aside what most animates and distinguishes man—his passions. In *Emile*, Rousseau proposes to make not the elite philosopher-king—the man with perfected reason who knows the truth of things—but the man most necessary to his own time, the modern democratic man. Rousseau proposed to make the man who was good for himself and good for others, the man who had sure judgments about things, the man who would be able to stand independent of others yet be compassionate to those in need. Rousseau proposed to make the natural man—not the man completed by a vision of perfected reason—but the man completed by following the dictates of nature. According to Rousseau, nature establishes both the goals and the limits of the education we should contrive for our children.

And what does nature tell us about ourselves? “Natural man is entirely for himself,” Rousseau writes early in *Emile*. From the infant’s first cry, to the self-interested demands the child makes of his parents, to our desire to be the most preferred when we seek to capture the interest of a mate, we operate on the basis of our own self-interest. Rousseau calls this “self-love,” and according to him there are two kinds—*amour de soi* and *amour-propre*. *Amour de soi* is the natural self-love given us at birth, a self-interested love that reveals itself primarily in our instincts to preserve ourselves. It is not a self-love we should be ashamed of, and we could not overcome it even if we sought to. *Amour-propre*, on the other hand, is a comparative kind of self-love—a love of self with a view to how others see and esteem us. It is self-love with a preferential demand that others love us more than they love themselves. The baby who cries because he is hungry or wet and seeks remedy for his condition cries out of *amour de soi*; the baby who cries as a demand for his mother to pick him up and pay attention to him—a demand for his mother to prefer him over herself—cries out of *amour-propre*. The child, in a famous passage in *Emile*, who runs a foot race against fellow competitors so as to gain the prize for the victor—sweet cakes that are a favorite of his—competes out of *amour de soi*; the child who runs the race to receive the accolades accorded to the victor, and so as to see himself as superior to the other competitors, competes out of *amour-propre*. The one is a healthy, inescapable, entirely natural self-love. The other is a function of pride and vanity. The one, Rousseau claims, is given by “the Author of things”; the other is a relative sentiment, artificial, and born in society. The education-

al object, then, is to preserve the healthy self-love given us by nature and to do all we can to prevent the development of the unhealthy self-love—to prevent the development of pride and vanity (See Bloom, 1979, p. 483–84). Now, all this is neither possible, nor, in the end, desirable. *Amour-propre*, after all, must come to be in a man's sexual life when he wants a woman to prefer him to all other men (and vice versa), and it can powerfully motivate his actions. Still, delay of, and then delicate control of, emergent passions is the primary task of the tutor, and this the tutor, Jean-Jacques, provides for his pupil Emile.

But how is a “natural man, entirely for himself” to be made good for others? Even *amour de soi*, a healthy self-love, is “entirely” self-interested. How is such a self-interested man to be made compassionate? Why would a self-interested man be willing to accept duties and obligations that come with being a citizen, a member of a community, someone's son, or someone's husband or father? Is there a place here for religion and faith in God in the moderation or elimination of man's instinctive self-interest?

Not according to Rousseau—at least not as we typically conceive of the ways religion counteracts the native impulses of men. In the long “Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar” Rousseau addresses religious faith, though the text makes it clear that the profession of the good Vicar would be more valuable and appropriate for a corrupt adolescent (such as Rousseau was, himself) than for Emile who has received protection from the corruptions of society. In his profession the Vicar speaks of “inner sentiment” and “conscience” as being natural to us. These are innate senses of justice and virtue, deep in our souls, and they are not contrary to our self-love, but come to be natural expressions of it (Dent, 1988, p. 234–242). Cruelty and injustice are the result of an enflamed *amour-propre*, and in the person with such inflamed self-love the development of conscience and compassion for others is problematic, if not altogether doubtful. But in the man Emile becomes, these passions are not inflamed, and his natural compassion for others is an expression of the divine gift given him at birth. His passions need careful education—there is danger of corruption all around. But these passions can be sublimated, or lifted up, to lead Emile to see his duties and obligations to be as sweet as they are necessary (Bloom, 1979, p. 15–16). Emile has no need of a pastor, or a Catholic priest, sermonizing on the evils of pride and submission to a forgiving god. He will recognize, thank, and even praise god as the giver of the gifts he enjoys, but it is doubtful one would ever find him, on any given Sunday, sitting in church.

### **The Founders' Dilemma**

The founders of the common schools in America—careful readers, all, of both the Greeks and Rousseau—were less sanguine about the natural goodness of man and the possibility of his perfected reason. Carl Kaestle writes about the ideology these founders shared—their common ideas about human nature and society that allowed them to interpret complex human problems and devise solutions to them (Kaestle, 1983, p. 76). This ideology, he argues, gravitated around three poles—republicanism, Protestantism, and capitalism—but the name he gives this thinking is “Native Protestant ideology.” In this conception, human beings were “born malleable and potentially good but need much careful guidance”—exactly opposite the thinking of Rousseau. These founders believed all men are equal in some formal ways, but they also believed some groups are more able, wise, and refined than others. This meant, in education and other arenas such as economics and politics, that institutions be shaped to maintain the values and leadership of cultivated, native, Protestant Americans (Kaestle, 1983, p. 95).



“The survival of the American republic depended upon the morality of its people,” Kaestle writes, “not in armies or constitutions or inspired leadership—but in the virtue of the proper-tied, industrious, and intelligent American yeoman” (Kaestle, 1983, p.79). Schooling was to stress unity, obedience, restraint, self-sacrifice, and the careful exercise of intelligence (p. 81). Here, moral education overlapped citizenship education (p. 97), and moral education was bound up with Protestant religious understandings, these understandings being its source and ground. The founders had a common understanding about the moral purposes for common schooling, among them that moral education was to produce obedient children, reduce crime, and discourage vice (p. 101).

The historical record is pretty clear: God used to be in the common public schools. Protestant understandings were evident, directly or indirectly, in the readers given to children in the one-room schoolhouse, in the citing and rehearsal of Bible verses, in the moral asides of teachers and schoolmasters, in the explanations of expected behavior given to students, and in school prayers. Protestant ideology and its place in the common school was extolled from the pulpit, demanded in the town hall, explained in domestic manuals, and proposed in educational texts.

The historical record is no less clear about how, from the very beginning, this native Protestant ideology was deeply problematic and the source of contention. The efforts to establish a common culture and a national unity, underpinned by a distinctly Protestant theology, caused anger and resentment from ethnic and religious groups with very different understandings, especially the Catholics. Even Protestants who might affirm much of the prevailing ideology could disagree with one another in quite vociferous terms about the conduct of their local common schools. Localists who disputed with those who favored centralized schooling objected on several counts. Many objected because they wanted to limit the costs of education that came with centralization, but many objected, as well, because they detected the sacrifice of their own traditions and the elimination of their own prerogatives as parents or members of minority groups (Kaestle, 1983, p. 148).

It was a relatively short time after the founding of our nation that Horace Mann’s vision of state-run common schools attended by “all” Americans became a reality—schools that were to be the moral training grounds that would end poverty, eliminate crime, and create a common American morality. Inculcating the American character into our children remained loosely based on Mann’s “pan-protestant” notion of moral instruction: with hard work and a good education, an American child could indeed be whatever he or she wanted (Kaestle, 1983). Just as the American Dream mythos was birthed, common schools became institutionalized and a burgeoning bureaucracy grew and was rationalized: public schools were perceived as *the* American institution to protect and grow the American Dream—a dream based in Christian Protestantism—an institutional panacea for all of America’s problems (Stevens, et. al, 2002).

On the other hand, it was not just Catholics or “fringe” Protestants who had growing concerns about the distinctly Protestant ethic at the heart of American moral instruction in our public schools. Increasingly moral instruction in public schools was less faith-based and more industry-based, developing into a mix of church, state, and increasingly, industrialist influence by the early part of the twentieth century (Spring, 2010). The growth of state-centralized school systems paralleled demographic, economic, political, intellectual, and even “spiritual” shifts that were

part and parcel of the industrial revolution and our growing belief in the American Dream—shifts that our founders could never have imagined. These cultural sea changes brought a growing sentiment that the nation would be well-served by a “common faith” grounded not in (a) religion (Protestant or otherwise), but rather in the new “scientific method” enacted through democratic institutions, particularly the institution of public schooling.

### John Dewey and the “Religious”

Thinkers from a very American and very new, philosophical tradition, Pragmatism, most vehemently championed this vision of a democratic common faith; and, not surprisingly, it was John Dewey who led the philosophical charge in this direction. Given that Dewey is one of the most prolific writers in our brief history, particularly on educational matters, it is something of a mystery that he wrote so little on religion’s role in public schooling or, for that matter, religion itself; on the other hand, given that Dewey (1910; 1916; 1920; 1938) spent much of his career “reconstructing” philosophy with the goal of making it experientially valuable, it makes some sense that he “ignored” issues of a completely metaphysical flavor. It is also clear that Dewey (1910; 1916; 1938) believed successful moral instruction, as with all “instruction,” should be based on democratic, earthbound, student-centered, “experience” rather than religion-based metaphysical “faith.” However, it was not until 1934, at the age of 75, that he took up, in any specific manner, the questions of God, religion, and what he deemed the religious “attitude”—an important educational quality.

In *A Common Faith*, Dewey (1934) argued that “religion” is “concretely” non-existent. Instead, “there is only a multitude of religions. ‘Religion’ is a strictly collective term and the collection it stands for is not even of the kind illustrated in textbooks of logic” (p. 7). He went on to propose that in religion’s stead, we would do better to think of the “religious”—free from the encumbrances of historic “religions”:

To be somewhat more explicit, a religion (and as I have just said there is no such thing as religion in general) always signifies a special body of beliefs and practices having some kind of institutional organization, loose or tight. In contrast, the adjective “religious” denotes nothing in the way of a specifiable entity, either institutional or as a system of beliefs. It does not denote anything to which one can specifically point as one can point to this and that historic religion or existing church. For it does not denote anything that can exist by itself or that can be organized into a particular and distinctive form of existence. It denotes attitudes that may be taken toward every object and every proposed end or ideal. (p.8)

And, for Dewey (1934), any experience that arouses the emotions and induces actions that unify the self, are religious—and it is in these “religious” experiences that we grow morally and can become increasingly “good”; and, these religious experiences will quite naturally happen in public school settings.

As to the “God question,” Dewey suggests that such a deity, in pragmatic thinking, is found in the actualizing of ideals; God is the union of ideas and subsequent action, thought and experience joined together:

Whether one gives the name “God” to this union, operative in thought and action, is a matter individual decision. But the function of such a working union of the ideal and actual seems to me to be identical with the force that has in fact been at-





tached to the conception of God in all the religions that have a spiritual content. (p. 35).

And so, as to the question of whether man needs “god” to be good, it seems Dewey would say resoundingly yes; for, it is in ideas turned to action that progress and human happiness are established and maintained; but it is certainly not the “God” envisioned in most traditional religious systems.

For Dewey, then, and as a reflection of our ongoing democratic experiment, to learn goodness, to find truth, to be moral *is* to be religious; however, to be religious is not to attach oneself (or nation) to a single or even a handful of specific religions or religious texts; to be religious is to become emotionally engaged in experience; to grow from experience, continually. God is not found in an ideal or in antiquated religious texts; God is found in the union of thought and action—actions ultimately judged by their practical, human results. Successful “moral” instruction in schools, by implication, is accomplished via the construction of educational experiences that rely on students’ emotional engagement; and, “God” is to be found in the actualizing of student interests/ideas—putting their ideas to the test and in so doing fomenting physical, intellectual, emotional, and, yes, spiritual/moral growth.

Dewey did much to further our understanding of educational practice; but, as the reader certainly must be imagining, his ideas on religion, the religious, “God,” and a common faith built on the democratic and scientific manifestation of ideals did little to endear him to Americans—the majority of whom remain steeped in traditional religious understandings, tied to specific religious traditions; and so the battle over religion in the public schools raged on . . . though as Nel Noddings (1993) argues, educational philosophers have been rather quiet on the issue over the last half-century, “as though the enlightenment project had succeeded” (p. xiv).

### Nel Noddings’ Critical Lessons

A self-described philosophical Deweyan (as well as a self-described secular humanist), contemporary educational philosopher Nel Noddings is anything but reticent when it comes to the tough issues of moral/spiritual/religious instruction in American public schools. She not only suggests *not* quelling religious debate in schools, she suggests encouraging such debate—religious or otherwise—so long as it is civil, intelligent and informed. As Noddings (2007) puts it in her chapter on religion in *Critical Lessons: What Our Schools Should Teach*,

There are certain questions that every thoughtful human being asks, and most of us long to hear how other reflective people have answered them. To “educate” without addressing these question is to engage in educational malpractice. It won’t do to argue that such questions should be explored in religious institutions, not in public schools. In most religious institutions, students will hear only one set of answers and, although some people find such answers deeply satisfying, single answers—accepted unreflectively—are intellectually unsatisfactory. How would a person committed to one view respond if she or he heard another well-articulated view? (p. 250)

Additionally, according to Noddings (2007), there are students (increasingly) who have no formal religious education—nothing with which to frame an understanding of the “big questions” in life and, “met with silence [in public school settings], they remain unexplored” (p. 250).

What makes Noddings' (1993) position here so uniquely important (and contentious on the parts of many religious communities) has to do with three school/teacher suggestions for practice: first, take up religious questions (the nature and existence of gods; the existence of evil; religion and gender; etc.) as they "come up" in the regular course of subject matter instruction/investigation, *not* in a stand-alone course on world religions. Secondly, and, even more contentiously, it should be expected that teachers can and will "maintain pedagogical neutrality" in the face of such enduring questions; finally, and most contentiously, teachers should be ready to present the arguments of both believers *and* nonbelievers to their students (p. xv).

The first suggestion above develops out of a more general concern Noddings has with the division of subject matter that begins at least by 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade in our typical public school set-up. Noddings (2007) suggests that this division sets up an artificiality between experience and schooling . . . rarely are life's questions/problems solved via only a single subject matter, as this common practice of subject matter division seems to suggest. Besides, argues Noddings (2007), there is no need to add yet another required course to our already long list when religious questions will quite naturally come up in the regular courses of study already required. The trick is in allowing those questions to come up, be discussed, and investigated further; only in this way will we succeed in helping our students investigate possible answers to these enduring human questions, and in that process "teach" our students to be strong critical thinkers.

The second suggestion, that teachers maintain "pedagogic neutrality," is intuitively difficult to imagine—though Noddings believes it can be achieved. Certainly, as Noddings points out, converting and/or proselytizing, whatever the position and regardless of the subject being examined, is clearly unconstitutional and so teachers must maintain some sense of neutrality on many contentious issues; on the other hand, short of ignoring the questions when they arise, how does a teacher maintain complete neutrality? Noddings' (2007) answer to these criticisms, put simply, is that "the idea [teacher neutrality] is to introduce students to a rich and fascinating literature that addresses the great existential questions from a variety of perspectives" (p. 250). That is, the teacher who successfully practices pedagogic neutrality is simply a guide and resource for student-centered investigation of religious and spiritual matters in the public school, leaving the student to reach her own reflective conclusions.

Finally, and maybe most contentiously, Noddings (1993; 2007) suggests that as guide and resource, and to insure well-balanced neutrality, the teacher direct students to the thinking of a wide variety of scholars—both nonbelievers and believers—and in that way we can educate for intelligent belief or, even, *unbelief*. And, once again, that these naturally arising human concerns can be used to further subject matter study in nearly all regularly required courses (math, English, science, etc.). This kind of broad teacher guidance clearly invites "a discussion" between the religious (and maybe, the non-religious) parent and the "neutral" teacher guiding her students to a variety of sources, many of which may fly in the face of the teachings of the parents. On the other hand, and as Noddings makes clear, we cannot call ourselves educators if we ignore the most important human questions; nor can we create strong critical thinkers if we don't think about critical human issues. Still, the question remains: is the public school really the proper venue for such discussions?

### Concluding Thoughts

"Will my child be a good person?" and "How do I help my child become a good person?" These *are* inevitable questions that both parents and school people must answer. And, as we have



suggested above, the God question is just as inevitable: Is faith in God necessary and central to being a good person and living a good life? The religious person and the nonreligious person are never going to see eye-to-eye on this central question, and so they are likely not to see eye-to-eye on the place of religious teaching and activities in the public school.

The religious person is likely not to share Plato's confidence in the power of human reason to lead people to see, understand, and embrace the good and to want to live a good life. Neither is the religious person likely to share Rousseau's faith in the natural goodness of man and his capacity to live a good and compassionate life when that goodness is nurtured and preserved. And certainly the religious person will not accept Dewey's conception of "God" nor Noddings' belief that much can be learned from both believer *and* non-believer. Plato's understanding conflicts with the religious man's commitment to faith over reason in providing answers to man's important questions. Rousseau's understanding conflicts with the doctrine of original sin and the idea that man needs faith and religious commitment in order to overcome his sinfulness and live a worthy life. Dewey's God of experience negates the religious person's ultimate focus on an after-life and Noddings' informed reflective thinker seems a lot more like the influence of Satan than a neutral treatment of important life questions in the minds of many religious people. Neither is the nonreligious person likely to share the beliefs and practices of the founders of the public schools who believed their own Protestant religion necessary to redeem man's flawed nature and make him fit both to be an American citizen and a servant of God, and who saw the public school as a legitimate and important place for such teaching. And, it might very well be the *non*-religious parent who protests Noddings' "neutrality" when religious texts are suggested for the investigation of enduring human questions.

None of these different ways of conceiving the possibility for human goodness and the way to the living of a good life is silly, stupid, or unreasonable. Each argument has a place in our tradition, and each shapes our current understanding and our current conflict. If the truth be told, many parents no doubt borrow something from each of these understandings in thinking about how to help their children live good lives. They may believe they see a natural goodness in their children they want to preserve and protect, and they may believe the development of the child's reason can lead to informed choice and compassionate adult behavior. They may also believe that religious teaching and religious faith may help their child along the way, perhaps as an anchor for the child's understanding and choice of action. This might be mere confusion on the part of parents. It may also be, however, an amalgam of understandings that shape the policies, theories and practices of schools and the well-intentioned people in them who want the best for the children they serve.

Those who work in public schools, or who send their children to them, or who try to think carefully about them, have some reason to try to be clear about their own understandings about the role of religion and the public schools, and they have reason to be clear about the understandings of others. Each of us has an opportunity to enter the discussion and debate about this issue in a knowing, reasonable, and sensitive way.

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